

The OPEN COURT

Devoted to the Science of Religion,
the Religion of Science, and the Extension
of the Religious Parliament Idea

FOUNDED BY EDWARD C. HEGELER

SEPTEMBER, 1930

“—”
VOLUME XLIV NUMBER 892

Price 20 Cents

The Open Court Publishing Company

Wieboldt Hall, 339 East Chicago Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

EDITED BY

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FRANK THILLY

and G. WATTS CUNNINGHAM

OF THE SAGE SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY, CORNELL UNIVERSITY
WITH THE CO-OPERATION OF

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Notes.

Charles A. A. Bennett. Ralph Barton Perry. John Baillie. The philosophical section of the Ohio College Association. The Facsimile-Text Society. Current philosophical periodicals.

PUBLISHED BI-MONTHLY

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND COMPANY

LANCASTER, PA.

55 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

SINGLE NUMBERS \$1.00 (5s.). PER ANNUM \$5.00 (25s.).

THE OPEN COURT

Volume XLIV (No. 9)

SEPTEMBER, 1930

Number 892

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Published monthly by
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337 East Chicago Avenue
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Subscription rates: \$2.00 a year; 20c a copy. Remittances may be made by personal checks, drafts, post-office or express money orders, payable to the Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago.

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Address all correspondence to the Open Court Publishing Company, 337 East Chicago Ave., Chicago.

Entered as Second-Class matter March 26, 1897, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under Act of March 3, 1879.

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THE OPEN COURT

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and
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Volume XLIV (No. 9) SEPTEMBER, 1930

Number 892

THE LEGEND OF LILITH

BY MAXIMILIAN RUDWIN

THE legend of Lilith is an intriguing revelation of old Semitic superstitions and persists to this very day in various forms. The personality of the Hebrew Lilith has been generally derived from the Babylonian-Assyrian Lilit, Lilu or Lilitu, an evil spirit. As we shall see later, this personification was a sort of fusion of the Roman Lamia, the Greek *hetara*, and the Turkish vampire. Belief in this demoness, growing up among the Jews during their Babylonian captivity, developed into a cult which lasted among the Jews of Mesopotamia down to the seventh century of our era. The Lilith legend is found only in the uncanonical works, although the word Lilith is already mentioned in pseudo-Isaiah. The earliest extant account of this legend is in the Alphabet of Ben Sira, but it was elaborated in the Talmud, the Targum and the Cabala.¹

Biblical mention of Lilith occurs when depicting the scene of desolation among Edom's ruined fortresses, where "the wild beasts of the desert shall meet with the wolves, and the satyr shall cry to his fellow: *lilith* shall also settle there and find for herself a place of rest." (Is. xxxiv. 14.) This biblical reference is not to an animal, as might be supposed from the context. The translation of *lilith* in the Septuagint as "a tailless ape" and in the King James Version as "a screech owl" has been bitterly and justly assailed. Symmachus in his Greek translation and St. Jerome in his Latin translation of the Old Testament understood better the Hebrew meaning of the

¹ As for critical literature on the legend of Lilith, we will mention, in addition to the items listed later, the following: Bacher, "Lilith, Königin von Smaraged," *Monatsschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, XII (1870), 187-9; Adolf Waldauer, "Lilith," *Populär-wissenschaftliche Monatsblätter*, VI (1886), 248-50; Israel Lévi, "Lilith et Lilin," *Revue des études juives*, LXVIII (1914), 5-21. The reader will also find a chapter on Lilith in Karl Knortz's interesting book, *Hexen, Teufel und Blocksbergspuk in Geschichte, Sage und Literatur* (Annaberg, Sachsen, 1914), pp. 120-49.

word by rendering *lilith* as "night-monster." (cf. "terror by night" in Psalms xci. 5.)

The fact is that the Hebrew word *lilith* is a feminine derivative of the Hebrew *lay'la* (Assyrian *leila*), which is the regular noun for "night." Thus Lilith was originally not a proper name but a general noun which signified "a daughter of the night" and designated any kind of monster in the form of woman who exercised her power for evil during darkness.² The mass of legends that gradually centered around a nocturnal monster in feminine form seems to have transformed her into a personality.

In Talmudic tradition Lilith is primarily a demoness who selects small children as her special victims. She is said to steal infants in the night and carry them off to the desert. The rabbinical writings depict this demoness as a terror to women at childbirth, whom she wishes to rob of their offspring. This specter, dressed in her finest raiment, is supposed to stand at the foot of the beds of lying-in women in order to snatch new-born babies from mothers' arms. However, this fiend in the form of woman can be fought with certain amulets, according to the Talmud. This accounts for the custom, prevailing to the present day among many orthodox Jews, of hanging an amulet, inscribed with the names of the angels Senoi, Sansenoi and Sanmangeloph around the child's neck at birth or of nailing "childbirth tablets," on walls or door-posts of the lying-in room in order to ward off Lilith's pernicious power over new-born children. Other Jews place in the chamber occupied by the new mother four coins with labels on which are inscribed the names of Adam and Eve accompanied by the words "*Avaunt thee, Lilith!*"

The hatred of Lilith for the children of men is, according to old Jewish belief, the result of her jealousy of the mother of mankind, who replaced her in the affections of Adam and thus robbed her of the joys of motherhood. As is well depicted in poetry and painting, Lilith is represented in Jewish mythology as the first wife of Adam, whom she later abandoned and turned into a demon. Another Jewish tradition has it that Lilith did not abandon her human husband until after she had borne to him a host of demons, spirits and *lilin* (plural of *lilith*).³ The Koran contains the screed that Lilith

² Alfred Kubin's *Dämonen und Nachtgesichte* (Dresden, 1926) contains a series of 128 fantastic illustrations of nocturnal visions, unapproached in modern art.

³ The Hebrew word *lilin* is not a true plural of *lilith*. We would expect *lilitim* or *lilitos* as a plural. The word is in reality the masculine counterpart of *lilith* and denotes a male night-monster.

presented our common ancestor with a daughter named Zelinda the Fair, and that it was this half-sister whom Cain married. Anatole France, in "la Fille de Lilith" (1889), tells the story of another deathless daughter of Lilith, who envies her half-sisters, the daughters of Eve, and prays for the experience of death that she also may enjoy life, and for remorse that she too may know pleasure. The French author has the immortal but fatal maiden come up to earth and attach herself to a young Parisian, wherefore it requires the exorcisms of the curé Safrac to purify this modern Tannhäuser from his voluptuous relations.

Talmudic tradition has it that Lilith was created simultaneously with Adam, both being joined together by the back, for it is written "male and female created He them, and called their name Adam." (Gen. i. 27.) In this condition they constantly quarreled and tore at each other. Then the Lord repented that he had fashioned them in this way and separated them into two independent bodies; but even thus they would not live in peace. A mismated pair from the very start, their incompatibility of temperament was too great for peace. Their views differed considerably on the all-important question of the headship of the family. Lilith was the first woman to challenge masculine supremacy. This *Mater malorum* is said to have started the fight for equal rights for women by contesting her husband's claim to be the head of the family. Adam began the first conversation with his bride by asserting that he was to be her master. Lilith replied that she had equal right to be the chief of the family. When she realized how hopelessly stubborn Adam was, she reached a decision similar to that of the end-of-the-nineteenth-century Nora in Ibsen's *Doll's House* (1879). She pronounced the *Shem hamephorash* (the Ineffable Name), the result of which was that she obtained wings with which she flew out of Eden and out of sight.

Adam, heart-broken over his loss of Lilith, cried in distress: "Master of the world, the woman whom Thou hast given me has flown away." The Creator then sent the three angels previously mentioned to find Lilith and persuade her to return to her husband and her hearth. She would not yield even after the angels had been sent again by the Lord to convey to her the doom that she would bear many children and that they should all die in infancy. Lilith considered the penalty so awful that she was about to put an end to her life by throwing herself into the sea. The three angels, moved by her anguish, agreed that she should have by way of compensa-

tion full power over all new-born children during eight days after birth for boys and during twenty days after birth for girls. In addition, she was given special power over all children born out of wedlock.

When Lilith refused to return to Adam, the second Eve (*i.e.* Mother) was now formed to compensate him for his first marital fiasco.⁴ This time, however, the Lord created the woman out of man's rib in order that there might no longer be any question of her independence, and that the embarrassing problem of women's rights might never be raised again among men.⁵ Evidently Jehovah with all his omniscience could not foresee the widespread suffragist movement of the present day.⁶

Samaël, chief of the fallen angels, one day found beautiful Lilith lamenting her errors in loneliness, and fell in love with her. As Lilith found Samaël radical on the question of the equality of sexes, which she had raised in Eden, she accepted him, and the two settled in the Valley of Jehannum (Gehenna). As successor to Adam in the affections of Lilith, Samaël is also called in the Talmud Adam-Belial in distinction to Adam-Kadmon, our first ancestor.

Samaël found in his consort a willing conspirator against the Lord in the latter's plans for man and womankind. Lilith was jealous of Eve, who replaced her in the affections of her first husband, just as Samaël was jealous of Adam, who was destined to be his successor in the celestial choir-stalls. While the demonic pair were witnessing the pleasures of our common ancestors in Eden, they burned with envy and decided to bring man and woman to a downfall so that they would be driven out of the Garden of Eden. According to the Revelations of St. John, it was Samaël or Satan, who, disguised as a serpent, tempted Eve to disobey the Lord by eating of the forbidden fruit and thus brought upon herself and her husband the wrath of their Creator. A certain Christian tradition identifies the serpent of the Garden of Eden not with Samaël or

⁴ The Jewish belief in the two wives of Adam is mentioned, among post-medieval Christian writers, by Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and by Johann Albert Fabricius, who, in his *Codex Pseudoepigraphus Veteris Testamenti* (1713), states that two wives were created for Adam "quarum una ex luto extra paradysum, altera in paradiso ex costa condita faerit." The first is Lilith, the second is Eve.

⁵ See M. D. Conway: *Demonology and Devil-Lore* (2 vols., London, 1879; 3rd ed., New York, 1889) II, 92 ff.

⁶ Mr. A. B. Sec, president of an elevator company, was undoubtedly right when he stated that it was Satan who procured in this country the passage of the law granting women equal rights with men.

Satan but with Lilith, who thus was the main instigator in the fall of our common ancestors. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in his famous poem "Eden Bower," follows this later tradition in ascribing the temptation in Eden to this serpent woman Lilith.

* * *

The idea of a "Devil's Dam" belongs wholly to Jewish tradition. It is foreign to Christian thought. Church doctrine has it that the Devil can have no wife inasmuch as he is excluded from the sacrament of marriage. In compensation, Christianity has conferred upon the Devil a mother or a grandmother. In the German secular play of Pope Joan, written in 1480, Lilith appears, therefore, as the Devil's grandmother. Victor Hugo, in *la Fin de Satan* (not published till 1886), identifies the Babylonian-Assyrian Lilith with the Egyptian Isis and represents her not as Satan's wife or mother but as Satan's daughter.

In addition to Lilith, who is his legal and lawful consort, Satan has had many connubial connections. The four concubines given the Devil by the Cabala are Nehema, Aggareth, Igymeth and Machlath. Satan also had incestuous relations with his daughter Sin, who, according to Milton, sprang full-blown from Satan's head, even as Minerva sprang full-panoplied from Jupiter's head (*Par. Lost*, ii. 758). The fruit of this forbidden union is Death (*ibid.*, ii. 728 and 787.).

* * *

Samaël presented Lilith on their wedding-day with a splendid kingdom where she was attended by four hundred and eighty troops. But all the wealth and honors heaped upon her by her second husband failed to compensate her for her lack of children. She has remained to this day the Lady of Sorrows. It is believed that her voice of grief can be heard in the air at night, like that of Rachel weeping over her children.

The grief of Lilith over the loss of her children from her first marriage is more pronounced since she was cursed by the Lord, who decreed that her children by her second husband must all die in infancy for her deserting her first husband.

According to another Jewish tradition, the Lord cursed Lilith, for her refusal to return to Adam, to beget demons, and, during her second marriage, she mothered a host of monsters. Asmodeus, Leviathan, and indeed most devils of distinction, sprang from this

union. Lilith is represented by certain rabbis as giving birth to a brood of *zebub* or flies.⁷ A second flock of children attributed to her by the Talmudists are the *succubi* or devils who normally retain the female form.

This fact accounts for Lilith's hostility to new-born infants, for whom she lies in wait to snatch them into the desert. But Lilith may after all not be so black as she is painted. Her intention in visiting the lying-in rooms of mortal women is perhaps not to harm but to hug the babies. This fatal immortal, who has been denied the joys of motherhood, seeks to press to her heart the babies of the happier members of her sex. This supposition is supported by a certain Jewish belief to the effect that Lilith loves babies and plays with them in their sleep on the night of the Sabbath. It is written in the Talmud that, if a child smiles during the night of the Sabbath or the New Moon, it is a sign that Lilith is playing with it.

*
* *
*

The Legend of Lilith has had much charm for modern writers, both in poem and play, in song and story.⁸

Alfred de Vigny, in his fragment "Lilith" (1859), offers us an original interpretation in that Lilith, the first incarnation of woman-kind, is an impersonation of sensuality and sterility. When Adam wearied of her and received Eve in her place, Lilith cursed the offspring of the woman who replaced her in the affections of Adam and started on her journey across the ages to found the religion of murderers. Through her influence, the first-born child of her rival became assassin of his own brother.

Among modern dramatizations of this ancient legend, Remy de Gourmont's *Lilith* (1891-2) merits special mention. This play is the biblical story of the creation and fall of man retold in dramatic form with great skill by a sensual sceptic. The author fabricated the revolting scenes of his play from the legends recorded in the mystical writings of the Jews. In this play, Lilith, though created

⁷ See R. P. Dow: "The Vengeful Brood of Lilith and Samaël," *Bulletin of the Brooklyn Entomological Society*, XII (1917), 1-9.

⁸ The "Bibliography of Lilith," published by A. S. Freidus in the *Bulletin of the Brooklyn Entomological Society*, XII (1917), 9-12, contains a caption "Lilith in Modern Literature," to which the reader is referred. We will add the following titles unknown to this compiler: Edmund W. Putnam, *Lilith, Epos*, 1907; G. S. Viereck, "Queen Lilith" (in his *The Candle and the Flame*), 1912; Carl Macleod Boyle, *Where Lilith Dances*, 1920; Wilhelm Jensen, "Lilith" (in his *Gedichte*), 1869; Marcellus Emants, *Lilith* (translated into German in 1895 by Anna Crons); Wilhelm Kloos, *Lilith Triumphatrix* (translated into German by L. Hauser).

by the Lord as Adam's helpmeet, never shared the bed and board of our common ancestor. She displeased her Creator by sensuality, which she asserted from the very moment of her birth, and for this reason she was handed over to Satan. As soon as this woman opened her eyes, she immediately asked to be led to man in order to satisfy her appetites. When the Lord announced to her that as a punishment she would never know man, she defiantly declared that woman always gained what she wished. Being banished to hell to keep company with the fallen angel, Lilith, not satisfied with the unfruitful caresses of her infernal husband, succeeded in seducing Adam at the moment when Satan soiled the mother of men in the form of a serpent.

This interpretation of the fall in Eden is based on an ancient Jewish tradition, which interprets the sin of our ancestors as sensuality. The Slavonic version of the Book of Enoch already states that Satan committed adultery with Eve. The Cabala, which also interprets the biblical story of the gastronomical temptation as an allegory, goes a step further and represents the sin of Adam and Eve as a twofold debauchery. The Zohar expressly states that Adam and Eve led a *ménage à quatre* with Samaël and Lilith. At the moment when the demon debauched the mother of mankind, the demoness offered her beauty to the founder of the human race. In another Cabalistic work, the demon is named Leviathan, and his consort is called Heva. Other mystical writings represent Leviathan as a sort of androgyny, of whom Samaël was the male incarnation and Lilith or Heva the female. From the illicit union of Adam and Lilith issued legions of larvae, *succubi* and elemental spirits, who filled the earth in order to corrupt the human race but who will be annihilated at the end of time.

The story of Adam's domestic troubles has also been treated by Robert Browning in *Adam, Lilith and Eve* (1883), by George Bernard Shaw in *Back to Methusaleh* (1921), by André Spire in *Samaël* (1921), by John Erskine in *Adam and Eve* (1927), and by Murray Sheehan in *Eden* (1927).

*
* *

The fatal power of Lilith is not limited to new-born infants. She offers a greater danger to men, particularly in their youth. In Eastern tradition, Lilith, as princess of the *succubi*, is primarily a seductress of men. "Lilith," says Langdon, "is the Semitic name

for the beautiful and licentious unmarried harlot who seduces men in streets and fields."⁹

Lilith was so beautiful, so overpowering in physical charms and intellectual gifts, that she was known everywhere in the Orient and came to be worshipped. It may be remarked in passing that a kind of Lilith-worship also existed in southern Europe during the seventh century, just as demon-worship has sporadically broken out in almost every European country and still exists today among the Yezidis of Asia Minor and among primitive tribes in other parts of the world.¹⁰

Eastern Tradition declares that Lilith, the queen of hell, disguised as the Queen of Sheba, tempted Solomon with her beauty and wit.¹¹ If the wisest of men fell a victim to her charms, how can poor mortals resist? It is said in fact that no man ever escaped the siren seductions of this devilish. Her beauty has attracted countless poets and painters who vied with one another to draw her portrait.

Many indeed are the inspired poetical and pictorial representations of her infernal Majesty. Dante Gabriel Rossetti has, by both his arts, celebrated the beauty of this diabo-lady.¹² G. Widmann, in his poem, *Der Heilige und die Tiere* (1906), speaks in enthusiastic terms of the beauty of Lilith. The Spanish novelist, Emilo Carrere, has written a novel about her eyes (*los Ojos de la Diablaesa*, 1913). But the remarkable thing about her person is her hair. Ben Sira states that Lilith was beautiful with long black hair. When Lilith arrived among the Nordics, she realized that gentlemen prefer blondes and so apparently dyed her hair. Rossetti, in his sonnet, "Lilith," describes her with golden locks. But in the meshes of her hair lurk a multitude of evil spirits. This demoness cannot be proud of her feet. But, as Anatole France has well remarked, she is clever enough to "hide her cloven hoof under a trailing skirt embroidered with pearls" (*le Jardin d'Épicure*, 1894).

⁹ Cf. Stephen H. Langdon: *Tammuz and Ishtar* (Oxford, 1914), p. 74. Lilith originally was not a harlot, although the temple harlot often passed herself off in the darkness as a *lilitu*, a "night-lady." See Josephus: *Jewish Antiquities* (XVIII, iii, 4) for such tricks and for the popular credulity with regard to the cohabitation of gods with mortals.

¹⁰ See the article "The Synagogue of Satan," p. 732.

¹¹ The kernel of the legend of the Queen of Sheba is in 1 Kings x. 1 ff. On this legend, consult J. Halévy: *la Légende de la Reine de Saba*. (*Annuaire de l'Ecole des Hautes Études. Section des Sciences historiques et philosophiques*.) Paris, 1905.

¹² On Rossetti's portrayal of Lilith, read Lafcadio Hearn's *Appreciations of Poetry* (New York, 1916), pp. 97-8.

Lilith has not evidently lost allure through the centuries. Her fascinations still operate on all who behold her. Daniel Defoe had this devil-damsel in mind when he said, "A lady-devil is about as dangerous a creature as one could meet." Like all beautiful women, this "accursed damozel" has a heart of ice. She uses her golden hair to captivate the young men; and the youth who loves her always dies, and after his death a single hair is found twisted around his heart, as described in Rossetti's sonnet.

When Faust beheld Lilith in the Walpurgis Night, Mephistopheles warned him against her charms in the following words:

"Beware the lure within her lovely tresses,
The splendid sole adornment of her hair!
When she succeeds therewith a youth to snare,
Not soon again she frees him from her jesses."
(*Faust* i. 4120-23.)

According to certain demonologists, Lady Lilith has not been exempt from the law to which all flesh is subject. She, too, could not withstand the ravages of time. Although in her younger days a woman of great beauty, she has now become a regular hell-hag. No demon of hell is a match for her in ugliness and wickedness. This Lilith forms the subject of the poem entitled *The Diabo-Lady, or a Match in Hell*, which was written in England in 1777 and "dedicated to the Worst Woman in her Majesty's Dominions." Richard Garnett, in *Madam Lucifer* (1888), paints a very unflattering portrait of the King-Devil's better or bitter half, of whom, as he says, he is "a thousand times more afraid . . . than of all the saints in the calendar." Kornel Makuszyński, in *Another Paradise Lost and Regained* (1926), represents Satan's spouse as a regular shrew, a monument of ancient art, as her husband humorously calls her.

* *

In every legend there is some bit of eternal verity. What is there symbolic in this Lilith legend; how is it to be appraised and interpreted? Evidently Lilith as the first wife of Adam is the symbol of "first love remembered." It is a well-known fact that a man rarely marries the first woman he has loved whether in reality or in reverie. Lilith represents the ideal woman of man's dreams. She is every man's dream-wife, in a word, perfection in petticoats. Each of us has in his heart, as Flaubert has said, a chamber for a queen, which is almost always left uninhabited. The woman we marry does not seem to occupy it. But often in our dreams this "nocturnal specter" enters into this chamber bringing with her a breath of air from a supernatural world.